

Synopsis

Conflict is immediately present in this story. It opens with an argument between the protagonist and her mother, ostensibly about a credit card bill but really about the opposing roles they have come to play in the aftermath of the father's death.

It has been more than a year since the funeral, but the protagonist is still struggling—not only to accept his absence but also to adjust to her new role as breadwinner. The initial quarrel escalates when the mother makes another seemingly thoughtless purchase, setting off a fiery exchange that reveals fissures and grievances long hidden under the quiet façade of routine.

At its very core, this is a story about family. But it is also about the relationship between want and need, and the sometimes whisper-thin line between the two. In setting this conflict against a backdrop of loss, the story makes a subtle exploration of individual and family values, and attempts to identify the things that truly matter.

Things That Matter

Whenever my mom and I fought, there was always food in the house afterward. It didn't matter what the fight was about or how long it lasted—one of us would buy the other a box of sushi or cupcakes, and that was that. Sometimes there were tears, if the fight had been terribly bad, but on the whole we didn't discuss it much, beyond defending ourselves and saying, "I'm sorry."

Maybe this was why we kept having the same arguments. That year they had all been about money. A few weeks before Christmas, I received a credit card bill that had me reaching for my cell phone and almost screaming at Ma. We couldn't hear each other properly because she was at the wet market and I was at the office, but I made sure to start again that night at home.

During the commute back from Ortigas I kept thinking about that bill—the shops, the dates of purchase, the individual transactions that when tallied together reached over 14,000 pesos. Some I recognized as my expenses, but most had been charged through the principal cardholder, Ma. I kept the supplementary line because I didn't spend much, even though since Pa died I'd been footing the entire bill. Seventeen thousand! That was half my year-end bonus. On the bus, I alternately calmed myself and composed opening salvos, my anger flaring up and down like that jaggedy ride all across Quezon City's potholes.

As it turned out, Ma and I didn't start arguing until after dinner. She'd been helping Kyle with his homework when I arrived, and although I was bursting with accusations it seemed petty to bring them up just when my little brother was learning to write. Dinner was pancit and meatballs, rolled tiny and without carrots or onions, just the way I liked them. Ma had made separate batches for me and Kyle, who preferred his larger and softer. Surely, you'd think, I

couldn't have stayed angry after that? But Ma's nonchalance put me off even more, and I jabbed at the meatballs and complained about the salty pancit.

"What's your problem?" Ma asked while we were doing the dishes.

I scrubbed the inside of a glass, then ran the sponge tightly over the rim. "Didn't I tell you over the phone?"

"What was it? I didn't understand."

I put the glass down on her side of the sink. "Did you soap all the way inside?" she asked while rinsing.

I pressed my lips together. "Our credit card bill is over 14,000 pesos."

"Oh? This time of the year is always so expensive."

"What the hell have you been buying?"

I didn't raise my voice, but my tone was enough to make her knit her eyebrows. I knew that look.

"What did you say?"

"What have you been buying?"

"Why are you asking me like that? Am I not your mother?"

I didn't say anything. It was a struggle not to roll my eyes.

"You work for a few months and you think you're my equal?"

I had been employed for over one year, but I didn't correct her. "It's my money," I said. "I have a right to know where it goes."

"The receipts are in my wallet. Go ahead, check! It's your expenses, too. Who do you think eats the food I buy?"

We continued washing the dishes. I started imagining the different ways this could have played out, if only I had been less angry. But then I thought about the amount I would have to shell out, and my irritation returned.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you bought?”

“Gifts! For your grandparents, aunts, uncles. I have so many nieces and nephews. How else would we show our faces at gatherings?” Ma banged the utensils, swishing water all over the place.

“Gifts! You think we can still afford that?” I was shaking.

“Ha! You think you’re feeding us now? You think I tutor for free?”

“Ever since Pa died, I’ve become the breadwinner,” I said, the words heavy in my mouth.

“I should decide how we spend our money.”

Ma’s eyes hardened. “I’m still the head of this household. You’re just my daughter.”

“So I have no right to my own money?”

“You have no right to talk to me like that.”

We stared at each other for a long time. Then I said, “If Pa were here, he would talk some sense into you.”

Ma crumpled the dishtowel in her hand and threw it on the counter. A slew of emotions flashed across her narrow face, distorting her features. I didn’t know whether she was about to slap me or start crying.

Eventually she left. We wouldn’t talk for several days. I always slept in the master bedroom with her and Kyle, but that night I found the door locked. All the pillows were inside, so I slept with a towel under my neck. It wasn’t too bad except I had a heavy feeling in my stomach. And I couldn’t shake the thoughts from my head.

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They sent my father home in a sardine can. The coffin was made of zinc, and so small I couldn't imagine how they fit him. I kept wondering how his arms were arranged, his strong legs. The coffin was entirely sealed. The man at the funeral parlor suggested not to open it. By the time Pa arrived back in the Philippines he had been dead for almost a month.

We never found out why the repatriation took so long. The agency said his employer wanted an autopsy, to clear the company from any liability, but that only took a couple of days. We knew because they emailed us a copy of the report. In return for our consent they had offered to cover all the costs—the embalming, airfare, everything. The woman from the agency said Pa's boss was relatively generous, as he hadn't even been employed there six months.

The autopsy only confirmed what we already knew: Pa died of diabetes complications from an infected wound. His coworkers at the port said he had injured himself while working without boots, and was afraid of getting reprimanded. They advised him to have it checked anyway, so when he showed up the next day they assumed he'd already been to the clinic. They said he was limping but otherwise OK. Apparently he told his supervisor he had fallen down the stairs.

None of us knew how things worked in Namibia, so we mostly just accepted whatever they told us. The woman from the agency was not unkind. Ma was very angry and wanted to sue, but she told us—very politely—that Pa had broken the rules so the company wasn't responsible. She was the only one we ever got to talk to. The agency wouldn't let us contact the company directly, even though Ma went to their office every day. She was always told the same things: it would take a while to send the body; they were doing their best; there were many bureaucratic processes on both ends.

I was angry, too. But unlike Ma—who blamed everything on the agency—I was mad at Pa. What a stupid way to die! Why didn't he go to the clinic? Why didn't he ask for new boots? During a Skype conversation he had mentioned that the boots they'd given him were half a size too small. *Why, Pa?* I asked his coffin again and again. *Didn't you think about us?*

Knowing Pa, he probably didn't want to risk getting a bad record. He had always been like that—self-sacrificing, quiet. After our printing business failed years ago he immediately went back to the job market. We had thought it would take him some time to recover, to mourn his investment of nearly twenty years, but as usual he was only practical.

Every morning he would go out the door earlier than any of us, carrying a stack of résumés in his bag and wearing new shoes. He always said it's the first impression that counts. In the evenings, we rehearsed answers to interview questions and practiced the perfect handshake. I even helped him dye his hair black. He also started combing it in a different way—to look hipper, he joked, but really just to hide the bald spots.

Pa was pushing fifty by then. During interviews he answered truthfully about his age, but liked to add, “I know, I'm experienced”—to lighten the conversation, and to turn a disadvantage into an advantage. We learned that from the internet. In truth these were his first real job interviews. Pa never finished college. He spent his early twenties doing manual work, before using his savings to start a printing business.

Years later, after it failed, he asked his friends and former classmates for referrals. But nobody could give him anything. They said he couldn't compete with younger applicants. Why didn't he just start another business? But Pa wouldn't hear of it. He told us he wanted something more certain, something steady and regular—a job.

Pa did get hired, eventually. For two years he worked as the manager of a convenience store in Caloocan—a very small one, not even well known. But he seemed happy to again be a boss, if only a little one. He said when he first started applying he expected to be calling everyone Sir, not the other way around.

It wasn't so bad. My allowance was halved, and we had to let go of the maid, but we still had a car, still ate out once a week on Sundays. I never knew how my parents did it. They never discussed money with me or Kyle around.

Ma took it the hardest. I could tell she missed going to the salon every other week, missed the mani-pedis, the occasional massage. At the grocery store she now checked the price of each brand. While waiting at the checkout counter she would sometimes take things out from our cart and ask me to put them back. We stopped getting cereal. Kyle threw a fit at first, but then we got used to oatmeal. Ma said it was better for us anyway.

At first I didn't understand. Why scrimp on such small things yet keep a gas-guzzling SUV? Why not trade the Fortuner for a sedan, or give it up altogether? Those days we hardly ever used it anyway, except to go out of town or visit relatives.

I didn't dare ask. I suspected it was about keeping up appearances. Whenever our neighbors asked about Pa's new job, Ma made it sound like the change wasn't a big deal, like it was better this way anyway, less stress. Pa did the same. When his friends found out where he was working they started feeling guilty. They kept offering to give him a ride after their reunions. But Pa never accepted. He probably told them he'd take a taxi. They never found out how long it actually took him to get home—how often he had to switch jeepneys, how many blocks he had to walk from the main road to our gate.

Some nights Ma would ask me to wait up for him. I would sit by the window and try to spot him among the shadowy trees and moving figures. Ours was a quiet street. The chatter of other people's TVs was about the only sound I could hear. When Pa appeared at the corner I would turn off the lights and pretend to have fallen asleep. I would try not to smell the sweat and smoke on him as he entered. Even as he lay a blanket over me I would keep my eyes shut, not wanting to see his fatigue, the lines on his face sunk deep by weariness.

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The next day I woke up to Kyle pulling the towel from under my neck. "Ate, it's late. Why are you still in bed? And why don't you have a pillow?"

"What time is it?"

He looked at his plastic wristwatch. "6:50."

I grabbed the towel from him. After a quick shower I took a banana from the kitchen and fled down the stairs. The three of us usually had breakfast together, but that morning I didn't even see Ma. "I'll go ahead!" I yelled from the stairwell. I was in such a hurry I forgot all about our fight. I didn't even have time to put on lipstick.

It was only at the gate, while waving for a tricycle, that I remembered. The knot in my stomach returned. I thought of nothing else during the commute. It was a relief to finally reach the office.

I was always the first to feel guilty. Ma cried easily during arguments, but afterward she could keep her cool for a long, long time. We were both adept at the silent treatment, had perfected it over the years. When Pa was still with us he would pass on our messages to each other: "Ma is asking if you've watered the plants yet?" or "Our daughter needs money for school."

With Pa gone, Kyle had to fulfill this role. I didn't know what Ma told him about our fight, but he didn't ask and I didn't explain.

"Get the receipts from Ma," I told him that evening.

"What receipts?"

"Basta. She knows."

He returned with a small pile, neatly stapled together and arranged by date. I tried to keep my blood pressure stable as I crosschecked the amounts against our bill. The effort made my head ache.

At dinner we made sure to eat with my brother seated in the middle. The evening news program filled the silence. I didn't offer to help Ma with the dishes. While they reviewed Kyle's lessons for the next day, I sneaked into their bedroom and grabbed a blanket and a pillow.

After two days I brought home a box of donuts. I didn't say anything, just left it on the table after dinner. When I checked again, the seal had been broken, but all six donuts were still there. Ma probably forbade Kyle from getting one. Whether because it was late or because she wanted him on her side, I didn't know. But I knew what it meant, that she didn't even put the box in the fridge. I counted the donuts again before reaching for a chocolate-covered one. As I sank my teeth into it, I wondered if I had gone too far this time.

But December was winding down, and year-end reports had to be submitted one after the other. I spent a lot of time at the office. I could have worked at home, but I was avoiding Ma too. Kyle ate most of the donuts. I had maybe two. Ma was inflexible until the end, not even touching her favorite strawberry kreme.

Still, I could tell she was getting softer. Every morning now she would lay out an extra placemat for me, even though we had stopped eating breakfast together. And when I came home

late there would be food waiting for me, arranged on platitos and hidden under a plastic dome. I was sure in a couple of days we would be washing the dishes together again.

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When Ma first brought home the air revitalizer, I didn't know what to think. She set it down on the table along with a bag of groceries and a family-size pizza. I peered at the box from the kitchen. "Come," she called. "Time for merienda."

It was a Sunday. I had spent the afternoon locked inside my room, revising a marketing report sent back by my boss. I went into the kitchen to find something to eat. I didn't even realize Ma had left until I saw her return.

Kyle dashed into the room, a makeshift cape flying behind him. In a few seconds he was devouring a large slice, the stringy pizza going cheese-first into his mouth.

"Did you wash your hands?" Ma asked as she sorted the groceries. She had her hair up in a bun, and although sweat ran down from her temples she seemed unusually cheerful.

He lowered the pizza.

"Never mind. Just use a napkin."

I walked in and pretended to be getting a glass of water. Kyle pointed at the pizza.

"Eat," Ma said. "It will soon get cold."

It was the first time she'd spoken to me in a week. I picked up a slice and sat down. "You don't want any?" I asked.

She shook her head. The grocery bag was now empty, and she was folding it into a tiny triangle.

"What's that?" Kyle asked. He nudged his chin toward the box.

I knew very well what it was. I had seen it several times on TV. Sometimes when Ma and I had nothing to do, we passed the time watching infomercials, criticizing the products and mocking the host. Only a few months ago, air revitalizers were all the rage among housewives. They actually said so on TV. Ma had seemed transfixed by the commercial—the close-up shots of tinted water swirling inside a bowl, the promise of foreign fragrances trapped in bottles—so I'd said, "What a waste of money."

She didn't look up from the TV. "You think so?"

"Why not just spray Lysol all over your house? It's the same thing but cheaper."

Now Ma opened the box and started showing its contents to Kyle. She took out a clear plastic bowl, a green leaf-shaped lid, and two glass bottles tinier than his hand. The black cord wound all the way across the table, toward me.

"It's for our room. Don't you two always complain about how stuffy it gets in the summer?"

"What does it do?" Kyle asked.

"It's supposed to rid the air of bacteria and replace it with..." Ma laughed. "I don't even remember what the guy said! But it was on sale—only 1,200 pesos. And the first bottle came free."

She snapped on the lid and raised the bowl to admire it under the light.

"I haven't even paid our last bill yet and you're already buying more stuff?"

The words came out so quickly. I didn't want to start another fight, but my insides had been protesting from the moment I saw the box.

Ma's eyebrows came together. She put the air revitalizer down. "I bought this for us."

"I already told you we don't need that." *Stop it*, I thought. *Stop talking*.

“What’s your problem?”

“I’m just saying,” I backtracked. “My salary isn’t that big. We should spend it on more important things, things that matter.”

Ma exploded. “Don’t be so arrogant! I paid for this myself. Who do you think you are?”

Her tears caught me by surprise. “You’re so arrogant,” she repeated. “You make all these assumptions and don’t even ask.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Like when you raised hell over that bill. Didn’t you think about how our relatives helped us after your father died? Or how they chip in for Kyle’s tuition?”

“So?”

“So what’s a few gifts in return?”

“But we can’t afford all that!”

“Yes, we can. I’m selling the Fortuner.”

“What?”

We had argued about it several times before. The Fortuner was the first brand new car Pa had bought, and Ma was adamant that we keep it, even though it practically became furniture in our garage.

“That’s right,” she replied. “You’re not the only one worried about this family.”

I didn’t say anything. Kyle had started crying too.

“Merry Christmas,” Ma said, pushing away the air revitalizer.

She slammed the door to the bedroom. Kyle followed, leaving me to sit in silence before putting away the pizza.

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The days passed without me seeing either one of them. They left extra early in the mornings, and whatever time I came home I'd find the table already cleared and the lights off. A thin film of brightness crept out from under their bedroom door, but apart from that you'd think the house was empty.

That weekend we went to my grandparents' house for our annual Christmas reunion. My father's side insisted on such traditions. We saw them four or five times a year. We weren't close to Ma's side of the family. Most of them lived a plane ride away in Davao, where she had grown up and studied.

Ma and I managed to act civil throughout the evening. But we sat at opposite ends of the room, and I busied myself with the food and my cousins' updates. Kyle stuck close to her side, but now and again drifted to our corner to play games. Occasionally an aunt or uncle would come by to hand me money. I always refused, and they always insisted. By then I was way too old to receive aguinaldo, but after Pa died they saw me as a child again.

Each time I patted my purse, I remembered what Ma had said. It didn't help that everyone kept thanking me for our gifts. When nobody was looking, I peeked at a tag and saw that Ma had written all three of our names under "Happy Holidays." I didn't even know what those boxes contained. The receipts weren't very descriptive.

Despite the approaching holidays, things between me and Ma didn't thaw at all. Our neighbors had strung up Christmas lights as early as November, but our house didn't even have a single parol. One evening I came home to find our tree already set up in the sala. That's when it really hit me. Until then we had always done that together.

Pa would have known what to do. By then he had been gone over a year already, but I still didn't know how to function without him. I'd thought everything would be OK as long as I

kept the family afloat. Weren't we supposed to grow closer from shared grief or something? But I wasn't even sure I had forgiven him already. I wondered how Ma felt. I never saw her crying again after the funeral. She put up a framed picture of him in the sala, and somehow that made his death seem normal.

On Christmas Eve, Ma didn't make dinner preparations until nightfall. Usually she started in the afternoon, ordering me to ready the ingredients while she and Kyle stood at the stove. In any case she seemed to be making up for lost time. A steady stream of washing, chopping, and frying sounds entered my room. Even the smells wafted past my walls. I recognized the scent of Christmas ham, and right then realized she must be preparing our *noche buena* too.

But why cook the midnight meal so early? Once I was sure she'd retreated to the bedroom, I crept into the kitchen. You would never guess Ma had just been there. The sink and stove were gleaming. A pile of clean dishes stood in one corner, dripping into a basin. The rice cooker hummed on the table. Beside it, under a plastic cover, sat a lonely pair of dishes: *adobo* and strips of fried ham.

Where was the roast chicken? The *lumpiang shanghai* and sweet spaghetti? I checked the fridge. Inside were stacks of microwavables containing Ma's famous macaroni salad. Each had a label: for this family, that family, friends, neighbors, relatives. Near the bottom I found a bowl containing a large helping of the salad, topped with extra grated cheese—just the way we liked it. There was nothing else: no fruits, no ice cream in the freezer. Even the savory pies and desserts we had received were gone, probably sent off as gifts to other people.

Was this Ma's way of punishing me? I thought about Kyle, how disappointed he would feel. We were used to grand Christmas dinners. Even after Pa's death Ma went on cooking all the

family favorites—more than we could split among the three of us. She always said it was just once a year, and anyway we could finish the rest over the following week. I never fought her on this. I was even happy to go on last-minute grocery trips, as long as it guaranteed a nice noche buena.

Someone turned on the lights in the adjacent room. I hurriedly closed the fridge door.

“Are we eating?” Kyle asked. “Ma says she’s skipping dinner.”

We set the table. I brought out the ham early, just so we’d have more than one dish. Surprisingly, Kyle didn’t say anything.

“What’s wrong with Ma?” I asked as we sat down. A group of children started singing carols outside, but we ignored them.

“I don’t know. She’s just lying in bed. Maybe she’s sick?”

He added, “Do you think she will join us for noche buena?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Eat.”

We chatted about school, homework, his New Year’s resolutions. His teacher had told them to come up with at least three. So far he had one: eat more vegetables. He made a face and admitted it was Ma’s idea.

“Ate,” he said after a pause. “Why haven’t you two made up yet?”

It was the first time he’d asked. “Basta. It’s complicated.”

“What did you fight about?”

“Weren’t you there?”

“Ah, the air thingy.”

“I guess. It wasn’t just that, but whatever.”

“Is it important?”

“Ha?”

“Does it matter what you fought about?”

He cut a piece of ham with his teeth, then used his spoon to flatten a mound of rice.

“Go on. Finish your food.”

We had a small bowl each of macaroni salad. I opened a Coke and poured him half a glass. “Don’t tell Ma,” I said. He giggled. Kyle often had bouts of coughing and wasn’t allowed cold drinks. After we’d cleared the evidence, he asked if I wanted to play. I hesitated; his games were kept in the master bedroom. But I didn’t want to spend Christmas Eve by myself, so I followed him in.

If Ma was surprised, she didn’t show it. She barely moved from her position on the bed. Kyle and I occupied the mattress near the TV. As he set up the board game, I flicked another glance at her. She had an arm slung over her forehead and a pillow propped against her back. The rest of her remained hidden under a blanket.

Only half my mind was on the game. I wondered if she really felt ill, or if she was just avoiding me again. Atop a low bookshelf stood the air revitalizer, still in its box.

“Your turn,” said Kyle.

I surveyed my options. Then I placed a tile next to his village and kicked out his pagoda.

“Boo!” He frowned and fiddled with his tiles.

I returned my gaze to the air revitalizer, trying to remember as much of the commercial as I could. When the game ended, Kyle challenged me to a rematch.

“Come,” I said. “Let’s play something else.”

I grabbed the air revitalizer and set it down on the bed, just opposite Ma. I scoured the pamphlet for the English instructions.

“What are you doing?” Kyle asked, fear evident in his voice.

“Basta. Go get some water.”

The blankets stirred, but Ma’s eyes didn’t open.

Kyle returned with a tabo full of water. I poured it into the bowl, just until the marked line. Between the two fragrances, I chose “Uplifting” and added three drops. Having secured the lid, I plugged in the cord and flipped on the switch. The contraption lit up with an eerie blue glow, and the water began swishing violently inside the bowl.

The scent wasn’t immediately noticeable. We had to almost touch the thing with our noses.

“What do you think?” I asked Kyle.

“It’s OK.”

I sniffed again. Some kind of flower, probably. In truth the scent reminded me more of chemicals.

“Smells good,” I said.

I caught Kyle’s eye and pointed at Ma, who was still pretending to be asleep. He shrugged his shoulders. I pointed again, and he crawled over to gently nudge her. “Ma, look. Your air thingy.”

Her eyes were ringed with red. She glanced at the still-whirring gadget and, very briefly, at me. She said nothing but angled her body toward us.

“Come closer,” I said. “The cord doesn’t stretch that far.”

She did, and Kyle and I made room for her. All three of us leaned in at the same time, and the sound of our collective inhalation gave me goose bumps.

“Yes, it does smell good.”